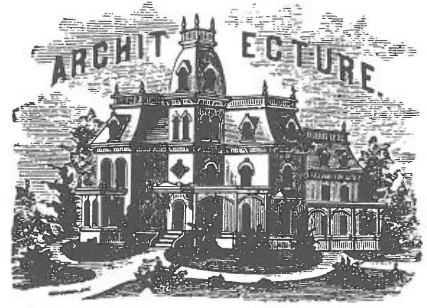


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Albert Randolph Ross 1869-1948



The career of Albert Randolph Ross is an extraordinary record of achievement in the design of Neo-Classical public buildings and monuments during the first three decades of this century. His projects, which were erected all over the country, owe much to the training he received while working for McKim, Mead & White during the 1890s. Ross' contribution to Maine architecture includes three small libraries and his own summer house.¹

Albert R. Ross was born outside Springfield, Massachusetts, in the town of Westfield on October 26, 1869. His family moved to Davenport, Iowa, about 1876 where his father, John W. Ross, became a locally prominent architect. After attending public schools, young Albert worked as an "architectural draftsman" for his father from 1884 to 1887. This experience enabled him to obtain a similar position in the office of Charles D. Swan of Buffalo in 1889-90. By 1891 Ross was working for McKim, Mead & White in New York City, the leading architectural



Figure 1. Public Library, Pittsfield, circa 1905 view (MHPC).

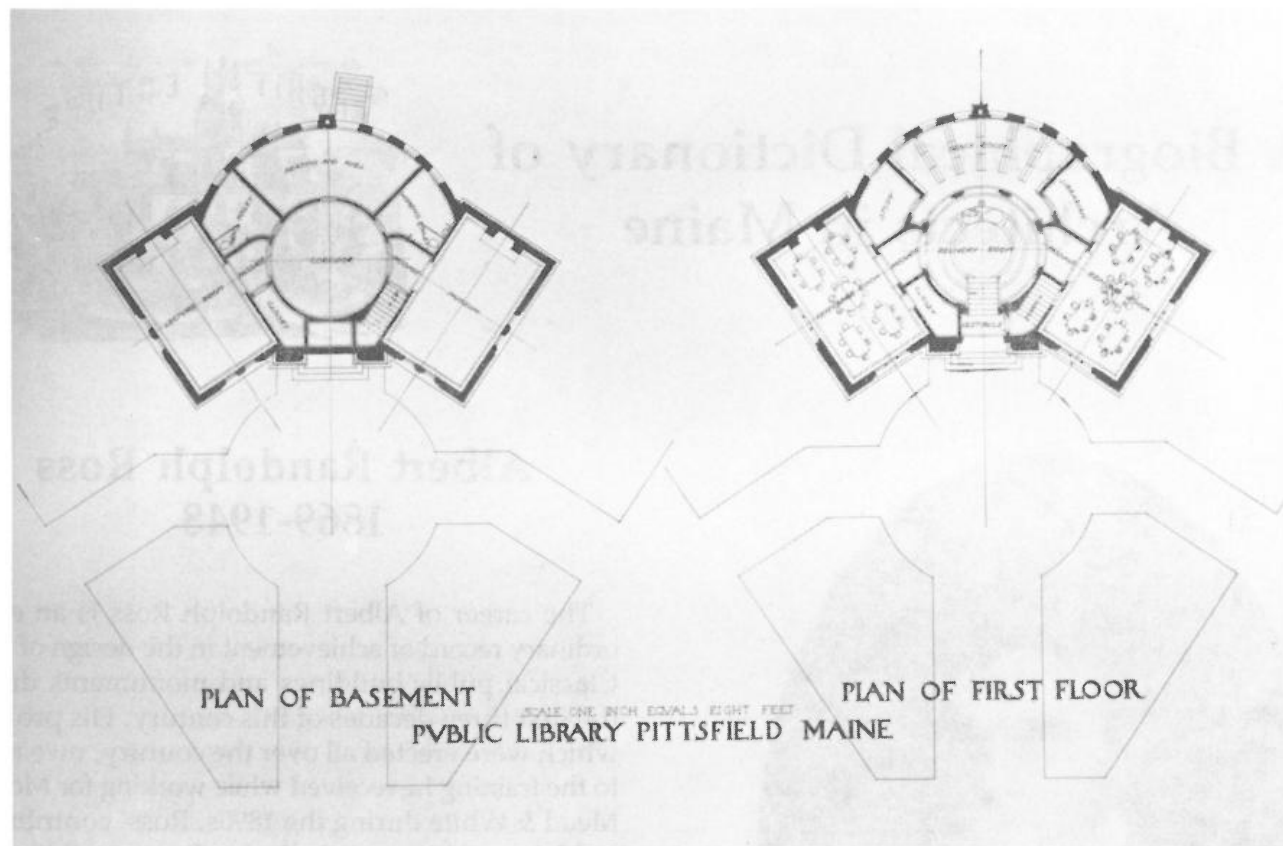


Figure 2. Floor Plans, Pittsfield Public Library, *The American Architect*, January 23, 1904
(Courtesy of Richard Cheek.)

firm in the country. It was probably during this period that he also studied sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²

Ross' training in sculpture suggests an artistic side that must have commended him to Stanford White, who is known to have been responsible for much of the firm's rich ornamentation. According to one source, Ross served as one of White's "principal assistants". In White's absence, McKim put Ross in charge of Cullum Hall at West Point.³ Records of the Architectural League of New York contain references to drawings by Ross for the University of the City of New York and the University of Virginia, two major McKim, Mead & White projects.⁴

In 1897 Ross established his own practice in New York City. A brief partnership with William S. Ackerman lasted from 1898 until April 1, 1901. Nothing has come to light concerning Ackerman's life, but this association apparently offered little to supplement Ross' skills.⁵ Ackerman & Ross did secure an extremely important commission in 1899 when they won the competition to design the Carnegie Public Library for Washington, D. C., which was erected under Ross' direction in 1902-03. Still standing at the intersection of Massachusetts and New York Avenues, this grand Neo-Classical structure suffers from obscurity because of its relatively remote location several blocks beyond the center of monumen-

tal Washington. In 1902 Charles F. McKim hired Ross and several others skilled in architectural rendering to prepare color perspectives for the Senate Park Commission's master plan for the nation's capitol.⁶

By 1906 Ross had completed designs for twelve library buildings ranging in cost from \$10,000 to \$375,000. These included the libraries in Columbus, Nashville, Atlanta, and San Diego. The architect compiled a collection of plates of photographs and renderings of his buildings, which was privately printed in 1906 under the title, *Public Libraries in the United States Designed by Albert Randolph Ross Architect*.⁷ Among those featured were his first two Maine projects, the libraries in Old Town and Pittsfield.

Both of these designs date from 1903.⁸ What most distinguishes Ross' small libraries from many others built in Maine during the same period is the architect's exceptional ability to create a very real sense of monumentality in small buildings, especially through his handling of interior spaces. In part this was accomplished through his choice of Neo-Classical styling. Even the smallest Ross design provided for a full basement lighted by windows above grade. This enabled the architect to create an interior staircase leading up to the main floor, which contained the book delivery room illuminated by skylights. In the case of the Pittsfield Library, the dome over this central area creates a generous sense



Figure 3. Rendering of the Old Town Public Library, *The American Architect*, January 23, 1904 (Courtesy of Richard Cheek).

of spaciousness at the very heart of the building.

Although nearly identical in square footage (Old Town cost \$10,000 and Pittsfield \$12,000), both buildings differ in plan and detailing. The Pittsfield Library occupies a large corner lot adjoining railroad tracks and a passenger station. The library was sited to stand on axis with a Civil War monument and the intersection of two streets (Figure 1). The two reading rooms are angled at forty-five degrees from the rotunda, providing lines of sight into both rooms from the central book delivery desk (Figure 2). The Pittsfield Library is quite similar in plan and exterior detailing to one Ross designed for Warsaw, New York, that was completed in 1906. In contrast, the Old Town Library is rectangular and located on a side street. The strong horizontal emphasis of this design is accentuated by banded "Roman Brick" (Figure 3). The interior plan displays strong axial symmetry in the principal rooms on the first floor.

Ross' third Maine project was begun in 1906 when he obtained the commission for the Carnegie Library at the Good Will Home in Hinckley, not far from Pittsfield (Figure 4).⁹ This large benevolent institution, a precursor to the more famous Boys Town in Iowa, was a rare instance of a non-municipal organization receiving assistance from Andrew Carnegie for the construction of a library. This institution contains a variety of wooden houses and brick educa-



Figure 4. Carnegie Library, Good Will Home, circa 1910 view (MHPC).

tional structures scattered over farmland along the Kennebec River. The library stands apart from the other buildings and faces the river. The Good Will Home Library illustrates the architect's seemingly inexhaustible ability to create finely sculptured Neo-Classical designs with an unfailing sense of effective detailing and proportions. As with the Pittsfield and Old Town libraries, Ross demonstrated his prevailing concern for the monumentality befitting a public building. The Good Will Home Library is rectangular with a rotunda and an entrance pavilion with columns in antis. This pavilion contains a grand staircase which is enframed with square piers and leads up to the book delivery room under the rotunda. Flanking stairs provide access to the basement. Unfortunately, the rotunda has been covered over on the inside, diminishing much of the intended effect. Ross used a scaled-down version of this design for a library in Penn Yan, New York, which was completed in 1905.

Albert Ross married Susan Chadwick Husted of Brookline, Massachusetts, in October, 1901. The couple summered in Boothbay Harbor for several seasons before purchasing a lot on the southern end of Negro Island. There they built a cottage in 1908 (Figure 5). The local paper welcomed them, commenting that the house, "... is a model bungalow style and commands one of the clearest and best



Figure 5. Rendering of the Ross Cottage by A. R. Ross, Boothbay, *Country Life in America*, July, 1916 (Courtesy of Richard Cheek).

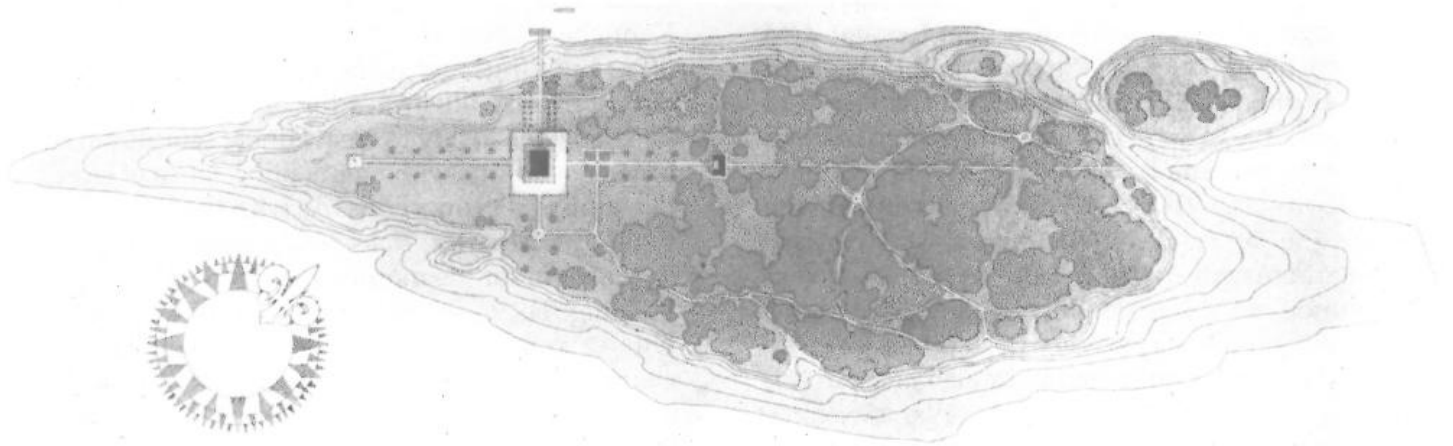


Figure 6. Landscape Design for Negro Island by A. R. Ross, Boothbay, *Country Life in America*, July, 1916 (Courtesy of Richard Cheek).

ocean and land views in the bay''.¹⁰

Ross' design has the symmetry and self-contained repose of a Mediterranean villa. The house is one-and-one-half stories high with a broad hipped roof extending down to encompass a veranda on all four elevations. At each corner the space between the porch posts is filled with delicate lattice in a diamond pattern. A large stone chimney rises up through the center of the cottage and, in what is a highly unusual feature, includes a fireplace in the hall on the second floor. With the ground floor reserved for the living room, dining room and kitchen, the second floor bedrooms were partitioned with folding glazed doors that could be opened to create a large space. The present owners have enlarged three dormers, leaving the one on the north side as it was originally.

The architect's comprehensive vision for his island estate was featured in an article in *Country Life in America* in 1916. In it Ross described his bungalow, which was designed for occupancy by his wife and no more than six guests. The servants and the laundry occupied an outbuilding. He provided the following rationale for the design: "In deciding on the bungalow type I wished not only a piazza all round, to give always a lee side but, with its simple roof, to avoid the tedious cottage type. It also permitted two stories in an apparent one-story building, and its compactness and simplicity of plan and construction would give the greatest accommodation for the least money." The most remarkable aspect of Ross' summer home was his landscaping of the island (Figure 6). The axial plan and terraced grounds immediately adjacent to the house are all products of his classical training with McKim, Mead & White. In the architect's landscape plan published in his *Country Life* article, the house is prominently sited on the west end of the island. To the east is a summer garden and the servants' quarters, to the north a wharf, to the south a lookout, and to the west a flag pole. The flag pole and the servants' quarters are equi-distant from the house, which is the same distance from the lookout to the wharf. The island is bisected on axis with the walk running east from the flag pole, but the wooded eastern half contained curvilinear paths with occasional lookouts.

Albert Ross' vision for Negro Island was never completed according to this plan. To begin with, even by 1916 he did not own all of the island. It would take many years to acquire the remaining parcels. Moreover, he departed from his master plan over the years. About 1926 a second cottage was built east of the main house. This simple shingled structure contained a furnace for off-season use. A second outbuilding was also erected near the servants' quarters, which apparently became his studio. Both

structures departed from the axial symmetry of his 1916 scheme.¹¹

The 1927 competition for the Milwaukee County Courthouse provided the culmination to Ross' career. The first prize was \$10,000, which Ross won in competition with thirty-two other firms.¹² He established an office in Milwaukee to supervise construction of the courthouse and an earlier project, the Public Safety Building.

In 1930 Ross' first wife died. Ten years later he married Theadores Winlock, a woman of Mexican descent who is reputed to have been less enamored with Maine's climate. Accordingly, a second retirement home was established in Miami Beach. It was in Boothbay Harbor, however, that the architect died in October, 1948.¹³ A collection of his drawings remained on Negro Island long after his death. The recent discovery of these drawings has provided an important record of this accomplished designer.

Roger G. Reed

NOTES

- ¹ A collection of presentation drawings by Ross for his major projects was obtained by Roger Howlett at Childs Gallery in Boston and is now owned by the Library of Congress. My thanks to Mr. Howlett, who recognized the importance of this collection and assisted me in developing my research of Ross' career. My appreciation also to John and Sarah Giles, owners of the Ross cottages in Boothbay, Maine, who saved the drawings and kindly shared with me the information they had on the life and career of Albert Randolph Ross.
- ² Ross also studied architecture in Greece, Italy, and France. This trip occurred sometime before 1894. Ross exhibited fifty-five of his European drawings at the Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts. See *Catalogue of the Architectural Exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*, Philadelphia, 1894. Biographical information on Albert Ross is difficult to uncover. In part this may be due to the absence of children. It may also be that his practice was national in scope and he did not establish many contacts in New York City. His death in Maine went unnoticed in the *New York Times*, notwithstanding his residence in the city for almost forty years. The two most important sources of biographical information are *Who's Who in America*, edited by John W. Leonard, Chicago, 1906 and 1912 editions; *Who Was Who in America*, Vol. 3, New York, 1963. Ross' training in sculpture undoubtedly assisted him in his later career in the design of monuments, which was a major source of income.
- ³ *McKim, Mead & White Architects* by Leland Roth, New York, 1983, pp. 229; *Stany the Gilded Life of Stanford White* by Paul R. Baker, New York, 1989, p. 220. Ross wrote a tribute to Stanford White for *Brickbuilder*, Vol. 15, December, 1906, p. 246.
- ⁴ The archives of the Architectural League are an important source for Ross projects. These records also suggest that Ross worked for other New York architects between the time he left Buffalo and was hired by McKim, Mead & White. There are records that he prepared architectural renderings for two firms: Tracy & Sawyer and Sawyer & Magonigle.
- ⁵ I have been unable to find any information on William S. Ackerman, although vital statistics in New York City have not been checked. The source for the termination date of the partnership is Ross' own publication. See note 7, below.
- ⁶ Roth, op. cit., p. 254.
- ⁷ A copy of this book is located in the Boston Public Library. Major projects included the public libraries in Atlanta, Nashville, Denver, San Diego, and Columbus.
- ⁸ For construction dates of these two buildings, see *The Industrial Journal*, Bangor, August, September, and December, 1903.
- ⁹ *The Industrial Journal*, August, 1907.
- ¹⁰ *Boothbay Register*, June 20, 1908, p. 3; July 18, 1908, p. 3.
- ¹¹ This construction date is conjectural and based on Town of Boothbay tax valuations. There are many local hearsay reports concerning Ross and parties on Negro Island. Apparently, this residence served as another office, linked to New York by telephone. Stories about parties and surviving family snapshots indicate the architect had a profound love of his island in Maine.
- ¹² *New York Times*, August 4, 1926, p. 35, c. 1.
- ¹³ *Who Was Who*, op. cit.; Death certificate, Town of Boothbay, Maine.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ALBERT RANDOLPH ROSS

Public Library, Pittsfield, 1903, Extant.
Public Library, Old Town, 1903, Altered.
Good Will Home Library, Hinckley, 1906, Extant.
A. R. Ross Cottage, Negro Island, Boothbay, 1908, Extant.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

The Pittsfield Library owns blueprints of their structure, and the Hinckley School has a color rendering by Ross of the Good Will Home Library.

Photograph of Albert Randolph Ross
Architecture, February 13, 1903.